

Stoic Nuggets of Practical Wisdom



When we say the word “Stoic” nowadays, we mainly refer to a person who is emotionless. However, Stoicism is an ancient stream of Philosophy; its principles and ideas are very practical and executable in our day-to-day life and its relevance to our times today can’t be overstated. Stoicism is said to have started around 300BC. It was a very interesting time, when a lot of changes were happening in the world, after the death of Alexander the Great, who perhaps left a bigger impact on the world than we might think. It can be argued that the changes gave rise to a materialistic approach to life, where the need of external conquest became stronger than the inner conquest over oneself.

As per this narrative, it follows that this external approach was expressed in various aspects of life. For example, the traditional noble role of the Politician, as defined by Plato and others, which was to serve the people by bringing justice into society, had devolved into the pursuit of power. Religion had become dogmatic and lost its essence, and the distorted notion of luck bound the human potential from blossoming. There was an overall decline in ethical principles.

The stoic philosophy came as a practical solution to this period of crisis. The most beautiful thing about it is perhaps, that it didn’t claim to invent anything new. Instead, it simply revived the ancient principles, making them more applicable based on the historical context and character of the people of the times.

As a glimpse into the Stoic approach to life, this article will investigate three short quotes, that capture a philosophical point of view that I believe is relevant and practical even for our times today.

“We cannot choose our external circumstances, but we can always choose how we respond to them.”- Epictetus (Discourses by Epictetus)

Although Epictetus lived his life as a slave, he was considered to be a free man. Despite his

external circumstances, his approach and response to life's circumstances emerged from a unique sense of choice.

If we are dependent on external factors like fears, expectations of other people, or circumstances of life, then where is our freedom? This sounds simple. But when we look at our day-to-day encounters, many times we miss this principle. Often we blame others for our failures and we blame external factors for our troubles. Because of this we suffer and struggle to liberate ourselves. In attempting to do so, however, we try to control things which are in reality not in our control, and if we don't realise it, we end up wasting time and energy, and all our efforts go in vain. This, in turn, results in unhappiness.

Instead, if we really understand and discern between what is in our control and what is not, we naturally find ourselves in harmony with life. Epictetus declares that we can change our attitudes towards the circumstances. We might discover that while circumstances may not change, we can choose a measured and intelligent response to them, rather than react to them. We might use the challenging circumstances as opportunities to grow and learn, with joy and a spirit of adventure, rather than become a victim, submitted to fate. For example, when I am badly stuck in traffic rather than to break my head with frustration, in anguish and anger, I might choose to use the opportunity to listen to some good music, realising that traffic is not something I can control, and therefore there is no point in getting frustrated. Why not be wiser in our response, and always make the most out of each situation?

“Dig within; There lies the well-spring of good: ever dig, and it will ever flow.” - Marcus Aurelius (Meditations)

Whereas Epictetus was a slave, Marcus Aurelius was a Roman Emperor. He was known as a man of dignity and perhaps was a good example of what Plato would have called a “philosopher-king”. He used to write down his deep reflections about life and what he learnt from it in a personal diary, which later became a most beautiful book of philosophy called *Meditations*, which contains deep and enriching wisdom that is still very relevant for us today.

Marcus Aurelius said that it is virtue that defines a human being. And that the human being, in his true nature is good. Digging inside is like looking within for causes and answers, and not outside. Who I am at my core? What drives me? What are my motives? Usually it is difficult to do this reflection, as we may find many things inside which we may not like. For example, we might find we are influenced by vices such as selfishness, greed, and rigidity.

But Marcus Aurelius discovered through his experiences that beyond all this, in our core nature as human beings, lies the fountain of goodness. The deeper we dig, beyond the layers of opinions, feelings, habits and vices, we might connect to this nature, which is pure, virtuous and good.

As an aspiring philosopher, this digging is my constant inner work, to remove the mud, the vices like selfishness, envy, jealousy, etc. The more I do this, the more I find that virtues (light) flow out, which were earlier blocked by vices (shadows). As men and women of virtue, we will become like rocks – stable and unshakable in our human resolve. What happens when waves

hit the rocks?

“Life, if well lived, is long enough.” – Seneca (On the Shortness of Life)

Seneca, in *On the Shortness of Life*, spoke about a few things related to the length of our life which we, at times, take for granted. Many times we complain that life is short, but when we reflect on what we do with our time, we will see that most of the time the things we do are not relevant and, in a way, we waste a lot of our time. Then we feel that life is short since we don't use the time to search what we really want to do. It's important to ponder and ask genuine questions to ourselves: What is the purpose of my life? Do I spend time on this purpose? Or do I just keep the main thing aside and get consumed with the other demands of life?

The time to live is here and now. It's not in the future. At times, people say that I will do things needed for survival now, and live the life of my dreams in the future, after retirement. To a Stoic Philosopher, this would be illogical. When we leave the main thing of our life to be sought in the future, do we know whether we will even be alive at that time? Do we know for sure whether we will be alive tomorrow? It is a hard reality. But it is based on the truth that life needs to be lived here and now! We have no control or certainty over tomorrow. So, we should maximise our life in the present and live each day fully as if it were the last.

When I wake up in the morning with this attitude towards life, I will know how to live and actively take every opportunity life will give me to live my main purpose. If I do this every day then I will not feel that life is short, because I'm actually doing all the things that I set out to do, everyday. When life will end, I will have no regrets, I can confidently say that I did justice to life. This is the art of living suggested by the Stoics.

When we look at Stoic philosophy, it might sound a bit sharp and hard for us to abide by. But perhaps this is because it is based upon the Truth of life and is practical in a very different way than we understand now. For us, for example, it is practical to fulfil the needs of survival, such that life in the future will be peaceful. But when we look at the laws which govern life, we see that many of our actions are not in sync with the laws of life. To a stoic, anything which is not in line with these laws is not logical because we are an integral part of life.

It is not possible to do justice to stoic philosophy in a short article. But these few quotes can open up a world of real investigation, and invite us to face life with a different perspective. The most interesting thing is that the Stoics offered practical guidance to face the challenges of their times. It seems that their approach might be viable in the present as well, as means to liberate ourselves from a sense of hopelessness and lack of meaningful purpose, to reveal our true human potential.